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ABSTRACT

In teaching students how to write, the utilitarian aspect does not need to be ignored, but--more important--the imaginative, expressive aspect should be emphasized. Since all writing depends on the full resources of the imagination, students need to be taught how to recreate or vivify people, objects, scenes, and feelings. A process which helps students learn to do this, TOTCOM, involves thinking, observing, and composing. Associative thinking provides students with ideas on which to focus in their writing. Another aid for students is the close observation of all their sensory perceptions, while a third is training in the importance of detail--close scrutiny of one small portion of very common things. After thinking, observing, and training, students may proceed to composing, beginning with simple basic structures and continuing on to longer pieces. This training and composing may then be used in aesthetic writings, such as limericks, lyrics, ballads, or fold songs. (JM)

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# THE USES OF THE IMAGINATION

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CS 201 450

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# THE USES OF THE IMAGINATION

For the next few moments review with me the events influencing the composition courses we have been teaching during this period W. H. Auden has so aptly called the Age of Anxiety.

In 1957 Russia propelled into the atmosphere a "fellow traveler of the earth." Revolving around and around the planet earth, Sputnik gave Russia a tremendous lead in space exploration. Momentarily, Sputnik relegated the United States to second place in space exploration, a place we have never taken to kindly.

You know the upheaval that at once resulted. We wrung our hands. Cries filled the air. Recrimination upon recrimination sounded. And we rolled up our sleeves, well above the elbow this time. As you well remember, all of America embarked upon a crash course to regain the place we felt should be ours--first among nations in scientific pursuits.

We built tremendous plants. We recruited the best scientific minds. We scoured the country, and beyond, for the best young minds and the most stalwart physiques. We poured millions upon millions into many independent schools and into many state-endowed colleges and universities. The need was urgent. We must catch up. That lone 1957 object in the sky bore the hammer and sickle. We did not like the fact that by night and by day a Russian satellite whirled in space and looked down upon us all.

And so, science triumphed. Other objects soon joined that first fellow traveler of the earth, but now the stars and stripes revolved in space beside the hammer and sickle.

But this urgency, this desire to catch up, this desire to surpass spilled over into our lives, ours of the humanities and particularly ours in composition. We, too, must do our part, authorities told us. We must gear our writing classes to scientific urgencies. We must teach a spare style. We had no time for amorphous dreams in a sequestered tower. We had no time for the leisurely stroll. We had only time for the giant leap.

You remember we taught what the authorities requested. We taught the utilitarian. We taught the scholarly style, and we taught students to deal in percents and dollars and tons and gallons to support their thesis sentence.

But the Sputnik scare passed, and America triumphed. Yet we still dealt with the utilitarian. We still dealt in percents and dollars and tons and gallons.

Then other crises erupted--in Dallas, in Memphis, in Kent, in Washington. Out of these crises we saw a new vision emerging and the necessity for a new focus. Pragmatism had had its day. It produced. But we wondered, in our emphasis of the purely utilitarian, whether we gave to the generation of young people any way to express their despair, their grief, their dreams.

We come now to you and me. We come to today. As we consider the uses of writing, we ask whether writing is purely utilitarian, purely analytical. Must we prepare only for--quote--success in college life and in the outside world--unquote? Can't we serve also the inner man, the voice aching to be heard? James Kinneavy, University of Texas, says we must, and I agree. Writing is, of course, utilitarian, and we cannot ignore that use. But neither can we ignore writing that is expressive, that denotes or connotes deepest feelings. We cannot ignore writing that is aesthetic--Kinneavy's categories--the type usually called imaginative. Note, I do not call it "creative," since all writing is in one way or another a creation.

We come thus to the focus of our meeting. Are there alternatives to analytical writing? I believe there are. One of these alternatives lies in re-defining what we mean by imaginative writing and in looking into one concept of the imagination. All writing calls upon the full resources of the imagination, a term I define as that which creates or re-creates, summons or vivifies people, objects, scenes.

The teacher's job is to help students sharpen their imagination. Let them write aesthetically. I am in agreement, complete agreement, with John Ciardi when he says, "An ulcer, gentlemen, is an unwritten poem." Everyone has the need to create. In my green teaching days I passed a crudely built home, rough stone placed upon rough stone, mortar exuding, the design lopsided, the plan erratic. Fronting the lawn was a concrete wall showing the same irregularity, the same lack of skill. At the opening of the wall were two pillars; on top of each were two--I resist using the word sculptured but that is the only word that suits, for the workman had indeed sculptured them--on each post were two sculptured heads. But they were unrecognizable heads. I could not tell whether they were male or female, human or animal. Eyes were there, and ears, but there was something almost simian about them. And in my green days I scoffed at such things. I called them crude and ugly.

Today I have mellowed. I know what that unsung builder, that unsung sculptor, was doing. He was creating. He was reaching deep into the recesses of one of mankind's greatest needs, the need to create.

We, too, can help our students create. We, too, can help them call upon all their powers of imagination. By imagination I do not mean solely the world of "Ligeia" or of "Kubla Khan" or of 20,000 Leagues under the Sea. That type of imagination, yes. But also the type that creates a writer's

world, or re-creates it, brings it back detail by detail.

What can we do? Many things. Let the students take time to write, just write. Let words flow with no apparent reason, with no apparent motive. The idea is to unlock that which is within each solitary skull. No two experiences are exactly alike. As our combination of genes makes each of us a unique individual, so does the combination of genes, environment, experience make our thoughts unique. It is this individuality in each student we appeal to.

To help students use the imagination to summon, to re-create, try a process I call--since this is an age of acronyms--TOTCOM. TOTCOM involves the student in four writing activities: the first T, Thinking; the O, Observing; the second T, Training; and the COM, Composing, but Composing I and II. More of this later.

Now to the first T in TOTCOM. Try associative thinking, in one of several ways. Ask students to write the first word that comes to their minds and then all thoughts flowing from it. Or give them the first word and let them proceed from that.

Here is one example of a student's associative thinking:

> Noise. Light. Chattering. A parrot I never had.
> My sparrow died. A dead child in the apartment building.
> Not interested in building. Why not? Why wasn't I
> chosen? Graduation night. I didn't march in with her.
> I didn't kiss her goodbye. Why happier now? Hurtful
> night. Graduation hurts.

From that first searching the student may select one word or one phrase and begin again, now focusing his thoughts, his associations, on one specific object or idea.

> Graduation hurts. Hat hurts. Collar tight. Cuts. Shoes new. Hurt. Feet sticky, hot. Bradowich's face red. Why did I have to march in with Bradowich? Taller. My shortness hurts. I wanted Erika. Hair yellow. Like the marigold she gave me. And the identification bracelet. She chose Crash Tontoni. Speed. Big. Picture in The Valley News. But I walked alone around the building. Dark. Dark. Always dark.

What he has now is a group of ideas that can become the major portion of a paper. He even has an abstraction based upon the accumulated details, an abstraction that could well become the thesis sentence. But the whole idea is to help the student get those words down on paper. Thoughts are fugitive things, and we know they can irrevocably vanish. Witness that perfect plea you are going to make at the next departmental meeting, all perfectly planned at a three a.m. wakeful session. Witness also the sole lame phrase remaining, if any remains, when the alarm goes off at seven o'clock. Llewelyn Powys tells us, and with very good reason, we must capture every word, no matter how "fanciful, extravagant, sentimental, bawdy, irrelevant."

To the O in TOTCOM--Observing. Help students observe. Let them ask themselves, "Am I really alive to my world?" Many of you do help students observe, but students themselves must recognize whether they are close observers, if their imaginations are to re-create. To emphasize the fact many people never really see, try the following exercises. These work best early in the term, after the class has been coming into the room for about two weeks.

1. What room am I in? With closed eyes, can I describe the color of the walls? Are they light, medium, or dark? What does the color most resemble in the vegetable world, the animal world, the mineral world? Without turning my head, do I know what exactly is one foot away to my right? Three feet away? To my left? Can I name six things behind me? For one of the things named, what details can I enumerate?

2. How would I describe the total smell of the place where I am reading this book? What does the smell most resemble? Why does it resemble this? Does the smell of the place at this moment bring memories of another place because of similarities or because of differences?

3. How many sounds can I identify as I look up from this text? Can I identify gradations of the sounds? Do I hear different types of movements or of breathing? How can I differentiate among the types?

4. How many different sensations of feeling do I have at the moment as I think of the chair, desk, the cover of the book, paper, pen; my sweater, wallet, shoes; my hair, lips, eyes, teeth; the atmosphere of the room.

5. What taste sensations do I have at this moment? How can I describe the following taste sensations: an empty stomach, a full one; a recent meal, a yearning for one; a lozenge, a cigarette, a mouthwash, a beer, a new lipstick, a recent throat examination, a kiss.

A digression. A room I teach in is painted a light shade of green. To part 4 of question 1, "What does the color most resemble in the animal world?" a student answered, "A grasshopper. I'd say it is grasshopper green." Dutiful teacher that I am, I agreed, congratulated the student, and said, "Yes, indeed. I've seen that exact shade in a young grasshopper in my rose bed." To which young mustachioed Mr. Hallam, with a devilish twinkle in his eye and with a much more devilish grin on his face, answered: "I don't mean that kind of grasshopper. I mean the drink. You know, the kind with . . ." He then recited the exact proportions, the exact results, the exact color. He was right. Our walls are a grasshopper green, a very liquid grasshopper green. Sophisticated student. Unsophisticated teacher.

A second digression. A room I teach in this term is a pale yellow-white. To the question, "What is the color like in the vegetable world?" young Mr. Gorton answered, "Celery." The class immediately howled. The walls are smudged, they pointed out. Foot prints mark the baseboard. Finger prints cover the light switch area. The howls were too much for young Mr. Gorton, but his imagination was at work. "Well," he conceded, it still reminds me of celery. It reminds me of tired celery." What we have here are alert minds open to their worlds, feeding into themselves sensory perceptions that become a sensory bank for all of their days.

Student answers, of course, will be vague at first. We therefore go to the second T in the TOTCOM writing process--Training. To help train students, to help them open their minds and let perceptions stream in so that the imagination can later summon or re-create them--for if there is no perception there can be no re-creation--ask questions similar to the following ones. These questions emphasize a deliberate scrutiny of one small portion of very common things: a lawn, a hand, a neck. We emphasize scrutiny of small areas, because for the beginning writer a huge panorama will usually yield only a huge generalization.

1. Examine one square foot of lawn. What shade of green is the grass? Do various shades exist? What are they? What exact shape are the blades? What degree of flexibility have they? What color is the soil beneath? What is its texture? What insects are there? What are their color, shape, size? What motions describe their movements? What plants mingle with the grass? What colors mingle with green? Are any man-made objects there?

2. Examine the back of a hand, its size, shape, color, texture. What are the nails like? The veins? The knuckles? The joints? The pores? What are the fingers like in length, size, flexibility, grace? Is the palm flat, fat, ridged, whorled? Are the pads at the tip of the fingers smooth, rough, flat, rounded, sharp, cut? Are other details noticeable?

3. Observe your father. Is he fair-, medium-, dark-complexioned? Is the back of his neck smooth, red, pockmarked, hairy, white, pink? Are the pores of his cheeks large, small, clear, blemished? Do the corners of his eyes slant upward, downward, not at all? Are there wrinkles on his forehead, near his eyes, near his mouth? Is there hair around his ears, lips, chin? Are his nostrils round, oval, small, flared, triangular? Do his lips lie parallel? Do they turn up? Turn down?

What do we do with such lists once we have them? They become the basis for papers focusing on these impressions. Students won't likely use all accumulated details, of course. From these sensory perceptions, however, the writer makes his abstraction that becomes a stated or ar implied topic or thesis sentence.

What else can we do? We come to the COM part of our acronym. The student composes. He not only thinks, observes, trains, but he also composes sentences and whole blocks of material.

Let us look at a metho. I call Composing I, an idea having its origin in Francis Christensen's concept of the cumulative sentence. Students analyze model sentences, identifying the basic part and finding the details added to vivify and particularize. Students then use the model sentences as patterns for their own, starting with a simple basic structure and adding modifiers to re-create the scene or person impressed upon their imagination. From short sentences, they go to longer models like the Kazin sample.

Steinbeck:

And on the other side a short ridge stood up, thinly brushed with starving sage, littered with broken granite.

Students:

Nearby, a small dock floated, heavily covered with fringelike frost, trapped by floating roots and twigs.

Right across, a cabin squatted, caged by brambled scrub, coated with layered dust.

Steinbeck:

In the mountains the sun is high in its arc
before it penetrates the gorge.

Students:

In the valley the moon rides low before it leaps
over fences of pine.

In the morning the water is green in its quietness
before boats ribbon it into blue-white banners.

Kazin:

Every sound from the street roared and trembled at
our windows--a mother feeding her child on the
doorstep, the screech of the trolley car on Rockaway
Avenue, the eternal smash of a handball against the
wall of our house, the clatter of "der Italyener"'s
cart packed with watermelons, the sing-song of
the old-clothes men walking Chester Street, the
long cries "Arbes! Arbes! Kinder! Kinder! Heyse
gute arbes!" (A Walker in the City.)

Student:

Every sound in the alley pushed its way into my
room--the crunch of the delivery truck backing
up to the meat market next door; the rumble of Big
Mike's wheelbarrow, heavy, I knew, with bone and
gristle and rotten meat he was hauling away; the
bawl of Crazy Pete, late for his morning scavenging,
"Wait! Wait! I no look yet!"

We use the thinking, observing, training to help students come also to what I call Composing II, composing longer pieces. Let us again look at a student sample.

She trudged closer to me. Piercing eyes stared at me from behind tarnished metal-rimmed bifocals, which rested far down on her nose. An apron, stuffed with handkerchiefs and streaked with bacon grease, shrouded her black dress. Again, she came closer. "Now you listen to me, Martha Lee." She was waving her ghostly white arms, pock-marked with brown moles, at me. I cringed and curled up into the chair. "Your Mother and Dad are terrible. Your Aunt Mary and them

> don't care about your Papa Gates. Sure they come up here to see him every Sunday. So what!" I sank still further into the chair. Then I glanced at the clock. She shouted, "Even your Uncle Homer. He goes off to work in Pittsburgh every day. Leaves us alone. He don't care."

Martha Lee has thought and observed. The sensory perceptions have fed into her mind, her mind has stored them, the imagination has re-created them: piercing eyes; tarnished bifocals; grease-streaked apron; ghostly pockmarked arms; a little girl, cringing and curling; a shouting grandmother. Out of these details created by the imagination something emerges, and this something is important for us as teachers of writing. From these perceptions the mind--the literate mind, the trained mind, the mind you and I help train--makes its abstraction. The abstraction is that Martha Lee's grandmother is a despicable person. In her paper Martha Lee has expressed feelings deep within her. She has created a vision of her grandmother. And in her using expressive writing, imaginative, rich in sensory perceptions, she has convinced us her vision is a valid one.

What I am saying is that we must help our students re-create. We must help them use this new-found awareness to gripe or to protest or to pray--to use the kind of discourse Kinneavy calls expressive. But we must also help them see we cannot accept their often unsupported generalizations such as "The campus is dead" or "The _____ (you fill in the blank space) is apathetic" (the student body or the president or the faculty). Or "God is dead" or "God is alive." We tell our students, "Yes, I'll consider your generalization. But convince me by sharing what you have locked in your mind, in your imagination. What is there that makes you believe the campus is dead or that

God is alive?" Their thinking, observing, training should help them compose pieces expressing what is deep within them.

Too, we must let them use this training and this composing for what Kinneavy calls aesthetic writing. If through thinking, observing, training, the student explains his abstraction by composing a limerick, a lyric, a ballad, or a folk song, why not?

A question must arise in your minds at this moment: "Does this mean we must scuttle the utilitarian?" Absolutely not. Are you asking, "Can't we accept logical evidence?" Absolutely. But the utilitarian can also be enriched through this thinking-observing-training-composing process.

What plea, then, am I making? Am I saying that we must abandon the utilitarian, the analytic, and that the frenzied days after Sputnik were misdirected? No. I am saying, as many of my good colleagues will say, that we have alternatives. That we can help our students open their minds, that we can help their imaginations create and re-create. That in addition to their writing analytically, we can help them write expressively and aesthetically.

I am saying we must lead them to see that St. Thomas Aquinas was right when he said, "Trust the authority of your senses." We must lead them to see that the world is out there to be thought about, to be observed, to be stored in the deep well of the conscious and the subconscious, to be created again by the magic and the power of the imagination.

The samples quoted above are from Eleanore C. Hibbs, Writing: Fact and Imagination (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1971), pp. 11, 12, 23, 24, 25, 252, 253.